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Even in the most severe situations, the most acute aspects of the landmine problem—minefields which directly threaten lives and livelihoods—can be addressed and brought under control in a finite time period if adequate resources are brought to bear in a professionally conceived and executed programme. The time period involved can, in general, be counted in years rather than decades.”

—“The Development of Indigenous Mine Action Capacities,” DHA Report

by Alexandra Meador, Mine Action Information Center

The mine action program in Kosovo, often praised as one of the most successful programs in mine action history, began its mission just six years ago and continued through December 2001 when Kosovo was declared generally impact-free from mines. Unlike other areas of the world where the landmine contamination often dates back to conflicts that occurred decades ago, Kosovo has only recently acquired the need for a mine action program. Understanding the unique circumstances surrounding the implementation of the Kosovo mine action program begins with an examination of the war.

The War in Kosovo

In 1998, after years of mounting tension in the former Yugoslavia region, fighting broke out between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and Serbian forces. The Contact Group (Germany, France, Italy, Britain, Russia and the United States) ordered an immediate ceasefire between the two parties and demanded implementation of international monitoring, withdrawal of Serbian forces from the area and the return of refugees to their homes. Although a brief suspension of hostilities took place, Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević did not execute any of the demands.¹

KLA regrouped its forces for another attack, which resulted in a counteroffensive from Serbian troops that was condemned by the U.N. Security Council for its use of excessive force, including

ethnic cleansing. During the conflict, both parties used landmines, often placing them in civilian areas around homes or buildings. After negotiations for peace fell apart, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led an air strike against Serbian military targets. The bombing campaign, although effective, littered the land with hundreds of cluster bomb units (CBUs) resulting in a massive amount of UXO.

On June 3, 1999, after 11 weeks of NATO bombing, an armistice was finally met, which included the return of over one million ethnic Albanian refugees to a region heavily affected by mine/UXO contamination. Within just 14 days of the ceasefire agreement, the United Nations established the U.N. Interim Administration for Kosovo (UNMIK), which then created the Mine Action Coordination Center (MACC).

Launching a Mine Action Program: UNMIK MACC

U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244 established UNMIK on June 10, 1999. Within just a few days of the implementation of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refugee return plan, UNMIK had received several mine accident reports.² Working to address the need for mine clearance, UNMIK, through the U.N. Mine Action Service, established the MACC on June 17, 1999.³ Serbian forces provided records for 620 minefields primarily located on the border between Albania and the Former Yugoslav

Republic of Macedonia. Other landmines that Serbian forces planted in the interior of the region, many in villages, were unmarked. NATO also supplied the MACC with the location of 333 CBU strike areas, containing an estimated 20,000 unexploded bomblets.⁴

According to Rajmonda Thaqi, a mine risk education (MRE) specialist formerly of UNMIK, the central task facing the UNMIK MACC at the conclusion of the war was clearing the roads and villages of landmines and CBUs in order to enable refugees and internally displaced persons to return home safely. The greatest hazard facing the returning refugees was—and still is—unexploded CBUs. Thaqi explained that the newness and attractive qualities of CBUs cause a general curiosity among the people, especially children, and lead to many of the accidents reported.

When first established, the UNMIK MACC set a goal to “replicate the situation that exists in virtually all European countries that have experienced conflict during the 20th century. Although mines/UXO can often be found in these countries, they pose only a minor threat to the population and are not an impediment to economic and social development. On the occasions that mines/UXO are found by members of the public, they are aware of the reporting actions to take and a capacity is trained to respond and deal with the threat in an appropriate and timely manner. In addition, for those who become victims, a comprehensive assistance capacity exists. This capaci-

ty not only includes immediate emergency treatment but also appropriate rehabilitation, psychosocial, reintegration and vocational support services.”⁶ The mission goals were established under an interim administration that agreed to transfer responsibilities to local institutions when the Kosovo government was prepared to accept them.⁵

Due to the absence of a formal government following the war, the UNMIK MACC was able to manage and coordinate all mine action within Kosovo, including any missions carried out by the 17 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and commercial companies working there. According to the Praxis Group, Ltd., an independent management consulting firm, “the MACC’s interpretation of its role was robust: it decided who was qualified to work, it determined who did what and it kept a close tab on the operator’s adherence to rules and procedures.”⁶ The program established itself early and authoritatively, thereby increasing its efficiency and effectiveness.

Mission accomplished. By December 2001, UNMIK MACC had destroyed 24,972 anti-tank and anti-personnel mines, 8,485 cluster munitions, and 13,896 items of UXO, and they had cleared a total of 32,224,107 square meters (12.44 square miles) of land.⁷

Thaqi states that by 2001, MRE in Kosovo was well-established through media outreach, community liaison programs and school-based “child-to-child” education programs. To accompany mine clearance efforts, the MACC created a Mine Awareness Support Team (MAST), which supplied an integrated approach to mine awareness by working with explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams, acting as a community liaison, and providing general mine awareness education. When the MACC completed its mission, NGO and MAST support was no longer needed because schoolteachers had been trained in MRE.³

Victim assistance (VA) in the months following the war was a significant problem. With the flood of returning refugees, the great number of accidents severely exceeded the resources of the only hospital equipped to handle emergency landmine cases. The World Health Organization and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), under the coordination of UNMIK, provided initial help for VA. Handicap International (HI) created HandiKos, a separate NGO that provides survivor rehabilitation in Kosovo.³

Transfer of Responsibilities

The UNMIK MACC implemented the final stage of its exit strategy on December 15, 2001: the transfer of mine action program responsibilities to newly founded Kosovo government institutions. The Office of Kosovo Protection Corps Coordinator (OKPCC) acquired most mine action responsibilities after the transfer. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) took over MRE for schools and areas with residual threat at the time. The Ministry of Public Health now gathers and organizes all infor-

mation on current and past mine/UXO victims and investigates any reported accidents. VA and rehabilitation tasks transferred to the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.⁷

OKPCC. The Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC) is a civil organization. The OKPCC contains various subdivisions such as Procurement, Logistics and Support, Infrastructure, Administration and Finance, and Operations and EOD Management.⁷ The EOD Management Section coordinates all aspects of mine action in Kosovo. Some features of this coordination include development of KPC’s EOD response capability and training in conjunction with HI, implementation of MRE and public information in partnership with MEST, provision of VA with the Ministry of Public Health, and management of the Information Management System for Mine Action. OKPCC now has seven KPC EOD teams trained and working in the field.

At the time of the transfer, the EOD management section faced many difficulties. These obstacles originated from unpreparedness due to lack of training and funding. Inefficiency of the KPC EOD teams became a primary concern when assessment studies revealed that HI clearance teams were able to cover 70 square meters (83.72 square yards) of land per day compared to the 10 square meters (11.96 square yards) per day of the KPC EOD teams. This inefficiency was attributed to the fact that the teams were new and undertrained. Another initial difficulty sprang from the fact that most of the KPC EOD team members are ethnic Albanians. The deep-rooted cultural and ethnic nature of the war revealed a lasting and intense tension between Albanians and Serbs. KPC clearance efforts in Serbian areas were completely confounded due to the resistant attitudes of the Serbs. Luckily, the problem was not critical because there are no current high-priority areas near Serbian villages.

The UNMIK MACC transferred all records of known contaminated sites in Kosovo—around 150 dangerous-area reports—to the OKPCC. Now, all new dangerous-area reports are received through KFOR or ICRC, or directly by the OKPCC which then processes and addresses them. The clearance focus of the seven KPC EOD teams is presently centered on dangerous areas located in central, west and southwest parts of Kosovo. According to Thaqi, there are currently 68 dangerous areas in Kosovo that require clearance, or at least technical survey.

NGOs. With the establishment of government and the transfer of mine action responsibilities, many NGOs previously working within Kosovo were no longer needed. HI remained to train the KPC EOD team and has one team operating in Kosovo. Seven HALO Trust teams began survey work in 2003 so that KPC EOD teams could focus solely on demining and UXO clearance. The last NGO, Mine Awareness Trust, a British organization, created a team of 10 ex-deminers pulled from different organizations to do additional surveying.³

Evaluations of UNMIK MACC

In a summary of their evaluation of the UNMIK MACC, the Praxis Group, Ltd., offered praise: “The mine action program in Kosovo was a resounding success. Nearly 45,000 lethal devices were destroyed, and over 30 million square meters [11.58 square miles] of land were painstakingly restored to their pre-war pristine state.”⁶

Although the program was successful, many organizations and people, including Thaqi, thought that the transfer of responsibilities took place much too early: “[Our time at the MACC] was short and we wanted it to be longer. ... Many people were working, but there were some areas that needed to be followed up on. ... We needed one more year to work.”³ Even though the initial transition may have been rocky and slow, current evidence indicates that conditions are improving exponentially.

The Future of Mine Action in Kosovo

Looking ahead, the objectives and goals of the current OKPCC mine action program are both satisfactory and realistic. The ultimate goal regarding mine/UXO contamination in Kosovo is clearance of all high-priority dangerous areas. Some areas, classified as low priority, are remote and difficult to reach, which makes them a considerably low risk. These sites, mostly located on mountainsides, are not only incredibly hard to reach, but they also can only be demined in the spring and summer due to the snow that accumulates in winter months. Thaqi explains that these hindrances are the reason why “the main goal is to finish the high and medium priorities and then decrease the number of EOD teams ... for the future, because I think the UXO problem will be [persistent].”³ Although complete clearance is almost impossible to obtain, the KPC continues to strive to ensure Kosovo is a mine-safe region. According to a 2002 evaluation by the Praxis Group, Kosovo is well on its way toward this end: “Whilst 267 serious mine and unexploded ordnance accidents killed or maimed 341 people in the first six months after the conflict ended, such accidents are now few and far between.”⁶ ♦

See “References and Endnotes” on page 108

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